

Those Daring Stage Drivers

By Kathi Bristow
Intern, Interpretation and Education Division
California State Parks, 2008

Jehu, the title bestowed upon stagecoach drivers, was taken from a Biblical quote in the Old Testament, Kings 9:20, “...and the driving is like the driving of Jehu the son of Nimshi; for he driveth furiously.”¹



Stage drivers were revered. The Reverend Henry W. Bellows, president of the United States Sanitary Commission, declared on a trip to California in 1864, “I think I should be compelled to nominate the stage-drivers, as being on the whole the most lofty, arrogant, reserved and superior class of being on the coast—that class that has inspired me with the most terror and reverence.”² They were the road warriors of their day.

Many dressed in the drivers’ “uniform” of the day, a long linen duster—a light overcoat to help fend off dust, rain, and wind; long gauntlet gloves; a wide-brimmed, low-crowned felt “wide-awake” hat; and tall leather boots. Each also carried a whip. Among the bevy of drivers employed by the stage companies were some who would become legendary during their lifetime and beyond.

Henry James “Hank” Monk



One of the most famous Jehus was Henry James Monk, who drove the stage from Genoa, Utah to Placerville, California. Different names have been attributed to him, such as “Knight of the Lash,” or the “King of Coachmen.” Most people knew him as “Hank.” He would drive stages at breakneck speeds along the winding Sierra mountain roads.

Hank became famous for the ride he gave Horace Greeley, a journalist for the *New York Daily Tribune*, over the Sierra Nevada mountains, from Virginia City, to Placerville. Greeley had complained to his driver, Hank, that the trip was going too slowly and he needed to reach Placerville, where he had a lecture engagement. It seems the constant grumbings from Greeley caused the driver to speed up and drive his team furiously. Hank yelled to Greeley, “Keep your seat, Horace; I’ll get you there on time!” Stories about the trip were

written and retold in many mining towns. Even Mark Twain and Artemus West used the story to embellish their own lectures.

Henry James Monk was born in Waddington, New York and at twenty-three years of the age crossed the Isthmus of Panama to arrive in California in 1852.³ He was employed by James Birch on the Auburn stage line until 1857, when he became a driver along the Genoa and Placerville route, through Glenbrook, Carson City, Strawberry, and Sportsman Hall, (a stage stop still in business as a restaurant in Cedar Grove near Placerville). Later, he became associated with the Pioneer Stage Company, run by Louis McLane, along a route from the Sacramento Valley to Utah.⁴

According to the *San Jose Pioneer* newspaper dated March 1, 1883, Hank died of pneumonia on September 23, 1883 at Carson City, Nevada. The paper wrote, "It is said that strangers visiting Carson City would no more think of departing without having seen Hank Monk than a visitor to Rome would omit to take a look at St. Peter's."⁵ He was buried in Nevada and upon his tombstone was inscribed, "Sacred to the memory of Hank Monk, the whitest, biggest-hearted and best-known stage driver in the West."⁶

George Monroe



Considered one of the most skilled whips during his lifetime, a mulatto named George Monroe, sometimes called "Alfred," gained renown driving stages for United States presidents. He held the reins when President Ulysses S. Grant visited Yosemite in 1879 and again during the visits of Presidents James A. Garfield and Rutherford B. Hayes. He also drove for General William T. Sherman.⁷ Monroe never gave his reins to any passenger except for U. S. Grant. He also provided transportation for eminent artists, including Thomas Moran and Albert Bierstadt—both well known for their striking landscape paintings of Yosemite.

Monroe was employed in 1866 by A. H. Washburn and Company (later known as the Yosemite Stage and Turnpike Company). His employer, Henry Washburn, used wagons built by Henderson & Son in Stockton, California.⁸ A few of the wagons Monroe drove can be seen today in the Yosemite National Park at the Pioneer Yosemite History Center.

Washburn remarked that George was, "the greatest of all." Monroe earned the title "Knight of the Sierras." His daily stage route took visitors along the Wawona Road, from Mariposa into the Yosemite Valley.

Monroe was not a very tall or large man, but was strong and considered one of the most skilled of reins men. He was a quiet with an easy manner. He wore long white gauntlet gloves and always dressed neatly. Born a slave in Georgia in 1844, he came to the Mariposa area when he was eleven. His father, who worked as a barber in the mining

camps of California, purchased his freedom. Monroe drove stages for over twenty years without injury to passengers, horses, or to the vehicles.⁹ Unfortunately he died as a result of injuries sustained in a wagon crash on November 15, 1886. Monroe was not the driver that day, but a passenger.

Clark “Old Chieftain” or “Old Foss” Foss



A boisterous and colorful driver, Clark Foss, ran the stage through Napa Valley during the 1860s and took many sightseers to the famed geysers in the Calistoga and the Geyserville area. He donned a large pearl-gray Stetson and could drive his team along the perilous trail to the geysers at great speed. Foss was a large, cheerful man, standing 6 feet 2 inches and weighing about 250 pounds. He had long sideburns and wavy hair. He carried the nickname, “Old Chieftain” or “Old Foss.” Born in Maine about 1819, he moved to California in the 1850s. He later named a settlement after himself at the southeastern end of Knights Valley in Sonoma County—Fossville. Here he built a stage station, post office and barn for horses, and established a hotel where many notable guests stayed, including Ulysses S. Grant and William Randolph Hearst.¹⁰

The route “Old Foss” drove over the Hogs Back mountain road near Healdsburg to the geysers reportedly took him fourteen minutes, along a road that had “not less than thirty-five turns and at one place ... a depression of some 1,900 feet.”¹¹ Unfortunately, Foss is also remembered for being one of the most reckless drivers. He suffered sorrow, broken bones, and humiliation when a lady passenger was killed and seven others badly injured in the late 1870s due to his negligence. The stage went off the road into a ravine on the way from Pine Flat to Fossville. Foss reportedly never got over the event and soon afterwards in 1881, stopped driving the stage.¹² Clark Foss’ son, Charlie, would take over the stage route. He began driving at age twelve and continued until the spring of 1906. He too was a daredevil whip around Healdsburg.

Charley Parkhurst

Perhaps one of the most interesting, most skillful whips was tobacco-chewin’ Charley Parkhurst, known throughout California. Parkhurst drove many stage company routes, including Sacramento to Placerville, Stockton to Mariposa, Oakland to San Jose, and from San Juan Bautista to Santa Cruz. Acknowledged as one of the best Jehus in the stage business, it was something of a different nature that later added to the notoriety of Charley, often called, “One-eyed Charley” or “Cockeyed Charley.”



Described as a “stout, compact figure, sun browned skin and beardless face with bluish-gray eyes,” the driver became a familiar figure around the Santa Cruz area and on the mountain roads until 1868.¹³ Parkhurst wore one patch over the left eye, (the result of an injury caused by a kick from a horse), and had a throaty gruff voice. Suffering from cancer of the mouth, the whip blew a horn when approaching bends along the roads to warn other travelers.¹⁴

Parkhurst drove a team for almost thirty years, enduring the rough, winding roads and occasional hold ups by robbers. On one occasion, a bandit called “Sugarfoot”—so named because of his habit of stomping his burlap-wrapped foot—ordered Charley to give up the strong box. Parkhurst obeyed, but was determined to settle the score. As luck would have it, Sugarfoot stopped the stage again on the same route. This time Charley shot and mortally wounded him. Sugarfoot managed to crawl to a cabin where he later died.¹⁵

In the late 1860s, Parkhurst stopped driving stages and opened a stage station and saloon between Santa Cruz and Watsonville, later selling it to move further into the woods. “One-eyed Charley” worked as a lumberjack for a while, but had to stop because of rheumatism and cancer of the mouth. The famous stagecoach driver died on December 29, 1879 and was buried in the Pioneer Odd Fellows Cemetery in Watsonville, California. Charley Parkhurst had become known nationally and was praised and immortalized in an obituary by the Ohio *Daily Star* newspaper:

He was one of the most dexterous and famous of the California drivers, ranking with Foss, Hank Monk, and George Gordon, and it was an honor to be striven for to occupy the spare end of the driver’s seat when the fearless Charley Parkhurst held the reins of a four or six in hand.¹⁶

To everyone’s surprise, an article in the *Daily Nevada State Journal* on Sunday, January 4, 1880, revealed that Charley was a woman! At the age of fifty-five, she had even signed the Great Register in 1867 to vote in California, when women did not have the right to do so.¹⁷ Her story slowly came out. Charley Parkhurst had been born in Lebanon, New Hampshire in 1812. Her given name was Charlotte Darkey Parkhurst and she had left an orphanage at a young age. Ebenezer Balch, the owner of a livery stable in Providence, Rhode Island, was in New Hampshire when he met young Charley in boy’s clothes. He assumed she was a boy and took *him* back to Rhode Island to raise as his own son.

Balch, who drove the stage in Rhode Island, taught Parkhurst how to ride horses and drive wagon teams. When Charley grew older, she left to seek opportunities out West, sailing on the steamship, *R.B. Forbes*, from Boston to Panama.¹⁸ In Panama she met John Morton, who owned a drayage business in San Francisco and convinced Charley to come to California for its opportunities.¹⁹

After Charley Parkhurst died, the coroner arrived to examine the body. He then discovered that *he* was a *she*. An autopsy determined that she had been a mother and,

it was believed, the baby died at a young age.²⁰ Questions always will remain as to why Charley chose to live a life as a man—no less a stage driver!

Charley Webster

Stagecoach drivers were a cast of characters, some notable for their looks and some for their personalities, others became known for the certain habits they adopted. One such driver on the Weaverville to Shasta route felt impelled to signal his presence by blowing a bugle. Charley Webster became well known for the bugle he would sound announcing his impending arrival with the mail. Weaverville Postmaster Al Paulsen recalled, “As I remember, ‘Bugle-blowing Charley’ Webster handled the ribbons on the Weaverville end of the line.” He went on to describe, “East of Weaverville there is a mesa. Every evening after reaching the mesa, Charley made it a practice to sound his bugle repeatedly, and that gave notice that the mail was coming in.”²¹

Gen. Phineas Banning



Phineas Banning became a famous whip and stage line owner in the Wilmington and Los Angeles areas. With his partner George Alexander, the two operated Alexander & Banning as a successful freight and stage line. Their passenger and freight wagons delivered cargo to gold miners on the Kern River, to Yuma, Arizona, even to Salt Lake City, Utah.

Banning's stages traveled between San Pedro and Wilmington, named for his birthplace, and later between Banning, California and Yuma, Arizona. (Banning was named after Phineas Banning.) Some of his notable passengers included Governor James Throckmorton of Texas, and Governor R.C. McCormick of Arizona.

Phineas Banning was born August 19, 1830 in Delaware, the ninth of eleven children. At 13, he left home to take his first job working as a clerk in his brother's Philadelphia law firm. At the age of 21, he sailed to Panama and crossed the Isthmus, before settling in San Pedro, California.

Banning became known as the father of the Port of Los Angeles and was elected to the California State Senate from 1865 to 1868. He helped ratify the thirteenth amendment abolishing slavery. During the Civil War, he ceded land to the Union Army to build a fort at Wilmington, the Drum Barracks. Appointed a Brigadier General of the First Brigade of the militia, he used the title of general for the rest of his life.

Banning died on March 8, 1885 in Wilmington, California. His sons, Captain William and George Hugh Banning wrote a book dedicated in their father's honor called, *Six Horses*, about the stagecoach era.



These are but a few of the stage drivers of California whose bravado and personalities have embellished the history books of the old West. The linkage from the West Coast to the Mississippi River in the east, made possible by the Butterfield Overland Mail Company and other stagecoach lines, gave access to the distant and remote towns of California.

Some passengers along the routes have reflected upon the discomfort they endured in their journals, but most would write about the thrill of their adventures on board a stage.

¹ Oscar Osburn Winthur, *Via Western Express & Stagecoach*, California: Stanford University Press, 1947.

² "Coaching," *Dogtown Territorial Quarterly*, (no year listed), California, No.47, 13.

³ Death of Hank Monk, 1883. *San Jose Pioneer*, March 10, 1883, pg 2/2.

⁴ Peg Presba, *The Legendary Hank Monk*, 1995. *Mountain Democrat*, Placerville, California, April 6, 1995.

⁵ Obituary, "Death of Hank Monk," *San Jose Pioneer*, March 10, 1883.

⁶ Editorial of Horace Greeley's Reply, *Oakland Tribune*, Sunday, August 4, 1946, Vol. CXLV, No. 35.

⁷ Gary F. Kurutz, *Knights of the Lash, The Stagecoach Stories of Major Benjamin C. Truman*. California: Book Club of California, 2005, 41-43.

⁸ Pioneer Yosemite History Center Online, "Wagons and Stagecoaches," <http://www.yosemite.ca.us/pioneer-yosemite-history-center/wagons.html>.

⁹ California's Sesquicentennial Wagon Train Organization. "Reining a Team Through Yosemite," California: California Sesquicentennial Board of Directors, California: California's Sesquicentennial Wagon Train, Mariposa Board of Directors, 1999, 129.

¹⁰ Hannah Clayburn, "Clark Foss: The Most Famous Stagecoach Driver in the World," 2003, <http://www.ourhealdsburg.com/history/foss.htm>.

¹¹ Felix J. Koch, "Last of Noted Family of Stage Drivers." *San Francisco Chronicle*, Sunday, September 29, 1906.

¹² Clayburn, *Ibid*.

¹³ Kurutz, *Ibid*, P. 64.

¹⁴ Stephen Michael Payne, *A Howling Wilderness: a History of the Summit Road Area of the Santa Cruz Mountains 1850-1906*. California: Loma Prieta Publishing Company, 1978, <http://www.santacruzpl.org/history/trans/stagec1.shtml>.

¹⁵ Edgar J. Hinkel & William E. McCann, *Oakland 1852-1938*, Volume One. California: The Oakland Public Library, <http://content.ancestry.com/Browse/BookView.aspx?dbid=26212&lid...>

¹⁶ "Thirty Years in Disguise: A Noted Old California Stage Driver Discovered, After Death, is He is a Woman," *The Daily Star*, Marion, Ohio, February 7, 1880.

¹⁷ “Charley Parkhurst: The Stage Driver—A Woman Who Passed as a Man for a Quarter of a Century”, *Daily Nevada State Journal*, January 4, 1880.

¹⁸ California’s Sesquicentennial Wagon Train *Ibid.* P. 107-108.

¹⁹ Craig MacDonald, *Cockeyed Charley Parkhurst: The West’s Most Unusual Stage Whip*. Colorado: Filter Press, 1973, 22.

²⁰ Kurutz, *Ibid.*

²¹ Editorial of Bugle-Blowing Charlie, *Oakland Tribune*, Sunday, August 4, 1946.